

EAST FRONT OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

Montana Partners for Fish & Wildlife



Introduction and General Description

The East Front of the Rocky Mountains is a spectacular and expansive landscape at the juncture of the Rocky Mountains to the western margin of the Northern Great Plains. In Montana, the East Front encompasses an area from roughly just north of Helena, Montana, angling northwest to the Canadian border. The abrupt change from rolling prairie to mountain topography produces significant elevational and climactic gradients, creating a high level of species and community diversity. The continental ice sheet reached just north of Choteau, Montana, leaving many locally abundant prairie potholes. Much of the local topography was affected by alpine glaciers. The exceptional habitat diversity is directly linked to the dramatic transition from

high elevation alpine tundra and montane forest, to foothills and mid-grass prairie. These communities are connected by important riparian corridors. Glaciated wetlands scattered across native grasslands add to the habitat diversity. The associated plant and animal diversity is unmatched.

The East Front's native plant and animal populations are generally intact due to sparse settlement and an economy based principally on ranching. Economically viable ranching operations have been a key factor in maintaining the East Front's fish and wildlife habitat. Tourism and recreation are growing in economic importance to the area.



Photo by Wayne Kasworm

Species of Special Concern

The East Front is an integral part of the Northern Continental Divide Ecosystem, one of the only remaining areas in the Continental United States with an intact assemblage of large mammalian carnivores. Grizzly bear, gray wolf, wolverine, and lynx, all considered rare or endangered in the U.S., still occur here. Rare birds found along the Front include boreal owls, ferruginous hawks, and trumpeter swans, all Species of Special Concern in Montana. Remnant populations of westslope cutthroat trout, bull trout, and harlequin ducks can still be found in the higher mountain streams. Arctic grayling have been extirpated from the East Front, but efforts are underway to re-establish grayling in historic streams.



Threats

Currently, there are three primary threats to the East Front. The most significant threat is habitat fragmentation caused by residential or commercial development and the conversion of native prairie to cropland. Degraded and de-watered stream systems are growing problems. The third major threat is noxious weeds and their ever expanding hold on the landscape.

Conservation Strategies

The Partners For Fish and Wildlife Program is working cooperatively with private landowners along the East Front on voluntary habitat restoration and habitat protection with conservation easements. Habitat restoration efforts currently focus on wetlands, streams, riparian areas, and native uplands. Projects have included wetland restoration, instream restoration, and riparian restoration through re-vegetation and improved grazing management. Several conservation easements are now in place to perpetually protect wetland and prairie communities. These easements also preserve the traditional ranching lifestyle which is another key component of this conservation strategy.

Although there have been considerable accomplishments within this Focus Area, more work remains to be done. The threats to this sensitive landscape are growing, so restoration and conservation are vitally important.



Riparian restoration through improved grazing management.



Instream restoration on Elk Creek.

Partners

Many Private Landowners
Environmental Protection Agency
Natural Resources Conservation Service
U.S. Forest Service
Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Montana Department of Environmental Quality
Lewis and Clark Conservation District
Lewis and Clark County
Teton County Conservation District
Pondera Conservation District
Ducks Unlimited
Last Chance Chapter - Audubon Society
Montana Trout Foundation
Missouri River FlyFishers
Montana Land Reliance
Montana Natural Heritage Program
Sun River Watershed Project
Teton River Watershed Group
The Nature Conservancy
Trout Unlimited
Blackfeet Tribe

Future Needs: Staff and Funding

Both the Partners For Fish and Wildlife Program and the Realty Program are working cooperatively to conserve and restore the unique habitat of the East Front. As both programs grow along the Front, more funding is needed to address the landowner interest and to restore and conserve the landscape. In addition, stewardship and monitoring are needed for the successfully completed restoration projects and established conservation easements.

Partners For Fish & Wildlife Program Needs:

More and more requests are being made for technical and financial assistance for habitat restoration. Landowners are waiting in line for help from the Partners Program. More base funding is needed to develop these projects and to secure additional funds from our involved partner agencies and organizations. An annual budget of \$80,000, dedicated to projects in the East Front Focus Area, would be a great help to address these needs.

Accomplishments

Project Accomplishments to Date:

9,755 acres of conservation easements
117 acres of wetland restoration
14 miles of riparian restoration
6.3 miles of in-stream restoration
5 irrigation diversion improvements
15 ranches were assisted with grazing management improvements, such as off-stream stock water developments, water gaps, cross-fencing, and/or riparian fencing
Collaborated on stream restoration and water management workshops and tours

Future Projects and Efforts:

Conservation easement negotiations with interested landowners
Stream channel restoration and riparian enhancement
Wetland restoration
Noxious weed control
Native fisheries restoration efforts
Collaboration on educational workshops
Continued watershed participation

Realty Program Needs:

As threats to the integrity of the Front grow stronger almost daily, more funds are needed to secure conservation easements with willing landowners. In visualizing our best hope, with large acreage landowners willing to establish conservation easements on their property, there is the potential to purchase easements on about 100,000 acres.



40-acre restored wetland on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation.

East Front of the Rocky Mountains (2,700,000 acres)

